

SANTONU KUMAR DHAR  
**THE EFFORT**

- A Novel -



# THE EFFORT

Santonu Kumar Dhar



WISH

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, no part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, or stored in a database or retrieval system, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Copyright © 2015 Wish Publishing Limited.  
All rights reserved.

First Edition: November, 2015

Library of Congress Catalogue-in-Publication Data

ISBN-10: 1511629614  
ISBN-13: 978-1511629614

Printed in United States of America

*For Mamoni*

# Chapter 1

The memory is dark at the edges, but I still know what happened. Maybe I only see the important parts. But I spent that day playing with friends, remembering seeing my hands filthy from playing ball in the cricket field on the edge of our town. I came back to my house after sunset and wondered why it was so dark. It wasn't like Mother to forget to the front hall light. She said she didn't want us to bump into anything when we came in. Maybe the power went out, I thought. If the other houses on the street that I passed had their lights on, I knew I hadn't noticed, I stepped into the house.

"Ac-choo!" The sound came from inside the living room and was followed by a giggle.

"Who's there?" I called from the hall with trepidation, but there was no response. Inside my chest I felt fear, but my curiosity carried me over the threshold into the living room.

"Mama?"

I took another step and heard a crunch of paper under my sneaker, then my mother's voice whisper, "Oh Deepak, that's enough. Turn on the lights."

"Surprise!"

Startled, I jumped to see a group of people under balloons and flowered streamers that were hanging from the ceiling. Every inch of the room seemed to be decorated just for me.

"Oh Mama!" I ran and wrapped my arms around her waist knowing she was the only one who would

arrange the celebration. “I bet you spent all day decorating for me!”

I had turned five years old that day; but whatever the birthday, she always made sure I knew it about remembering the special day on which I was born.

“It’s for you, my son,” Mama whispered in my ear as she leaned close to me. “I always want you to know,” she said and pulled my cheeks into her gentle fingertips, “how grateful I am to remember the day you and I met.” She kissed my forehead and took my hand softly into hers and led me to the table that held a homemade cake. Sugared letters read the words, “Happy Birthday to you Apu!”

I wondered if everyone likes seeing their name on a cake. I liked that my name was short and Mama always made sure the piece with my name was cut and put on a plate only for me.

“Hey, I helped with this surprise too,” Papa said. He slapped my back and squeezed my shoulder. “Everyone sing to my son!” Papa clapped his hands to start the song. Everyone sang the same words but not at the same time. It was funny and we all laughed. I was singing and laughing too. Papa lit the candles on the cake and Mama turned off the lights again. The song crescendoed and everyone held their breath so I could make a wish and blow out the candles.

I wish my mother and father are always beside me, I thought. The air puffed from my cheeks and the candles went dark. The smell of sulfur from the burnt wicks touched my nose.

There was silence. The room stayed dark. I couldn't feel any of my family around me. Trying to pull air into my cheeks in an attempt to reverse the action was futile. The candles would not light again.

Surrounded by darkness, I was alone. Panicked, I wanted to take my wish back; to clarify it. I didn't want my parents beside me; I wanted to live with them forever. Specifically, I wanted that exact moment. Not the memory of Mother and Father smiling while I extinguished little tongues of fire that flapped into the air carrying wishes into fruition; but, to live with their bodies alongside me in the very second when I closed my eyes wanting something so important as to see Mama's eyes remembering the day she met me.

I wanted to wish for rebirth over and over to feel as special as the three of us felt when we were joined together with my birth.

In my bed, my body bent forward and my eyes popped open. The memory of that birthday haunted another dream. It felt like a long time ago and yet the dream cast vivid and palpable images that I would swear were recent.

I woke on my ninth birthday knowing it was not a special number and knowing it was not a milestone. Papa had not acknowledged my birthday since Mama died. Three years. I wipe away tears whenever I thought how much time passed and how much more time I have to spend without her. How many more birthdays will I have without a cake and present?

Never would I have her homemade cake with fruit

dipped in chocolate for decoration or have my name written in colored sugar marking my slice of cake. There were no more celebrations with her.

I missed Mama's touches and her love. I missed her kisses and her cake. Most of all I missed the effort that she made to make me happy. I rolled over and looked at the wall and noticed the absence of flower streamers and balloons. I looked at the chipping paint on the wall and remembered how Mama used to tell me not to scratch my fingernail along the wall to make the crack bigger. I could hardly hear her voice any more in my thoughts and pressed my eyes together to recall the whispers from my dream.

I felt her breath on my neck but I couldn't hear what she said to me. I couldn't remember the dream and wondered when the projector would be reloaded for me to see the film again as I slept.

Sadly, I stretched my arms from under the blankets. The chill in the air kissed my skin like my mother's lips. I looked at the little bit of furniture in my room and noticed how bare I had kept it. My bed and the small table I used for homework took up a great deal of space in the small quarters. I remembered keeping drawings Mama and I would sketch during our lunchtimes together. They were taken down soon after she passed. Papa would not let me have her photo in a frame any longer. He said it brought sorrow and I should feel joy.

It was the moments when I felt alone in the empty space of my room that I wanted to tell Papa that I loved him. I wanted to tell him that I would hold on



to him forever if he promised not to die.

I took a t-shirt from the shelf that hung on the wall. The clock hanging over the doorway read eight o'clock. My breath coiled in a frown around my chin. Papa left for work each day before seven. I knew I was alone. The soles of my feet took the chill from the tile floor and made my back shiver. I thought to myself with hope, Perhaps Papa took a leave from work and stayed home?

I ran to his room and exclaimed, "Papa!"

It was important for my father to go to work, but today was my birthday. For weeks, I lied and told Papa it wasn't a special day. I told him that I didn't need a cake or a gift or even acknowledgment that I was growing older. He couldn't feel like I was expecting more than he was doing. Mama always did her best. And it was always enough. "Papa?" I called again but knew there was no answer. He had gone to work in the factory.

I climbed into my father's bed and smelled the pillow holding the spicy scent remaining from his skin and hair. I wondered if my mother's smell remained in the room or if it had all disappeared in the time since her death. A tear fell from the corner of my eye and when I felt it trickle to the corner of my lips, I tasted the salty sleep in my mouth. Stretching again, I walked to the bathroom to brush my teeth and wash up for the day ahead.

Outside dogs were barking. It was not unusual, but I hated the noise. They barked at people and other dogs. They barked at the possibility of food and I

thought they even barked at the wind when it blew past their ears. I growled and closed my eyes asking silently for relief from the noise while I continued to brush my teeth. But this young man of nine looking back at me in the mirror was old enough and strong enough to quiet the animals. A forceful command from the window should do the trick.

I stretched on my tip toes and cried out, “Quiet!”

The dogs still barked.

I pulled the chair from my room into the bathroom and balanced it against the wall so I could get a better view of the dogs and they could hear my command clearly.

“I said to be quiet!”

Something caught the corner of my eye. I leaned into the window, but crash, the chair flipped from under my feet to over my head. I sat on the floor startled and disappointed that my ninth birthday was worse than any I had remembered.

But then I remembered my mother. I remembered falling and having my hands outstretched with every fall to help me up each time. I pushed the chair off my body and stood to assure I wasn’t hurt and the chair was not broken.

Frustration welled up inside my chest. I pulled the growl from my belly through my throat and stormed through the rooms to yell at the dogs outside.

I pulled the door open and was taken aback. The dogs seemed to quiet even though their barking was even louder with the door open. Frustration fell away from me. I couldn't hear the dogs any longer.

My eyes saw a bicycle on the other side of the veranda. Whose bike is that? A note on the handlebars? A ribbon like it's a gift on the seat? I ran to the bike and pulled the note so I could read it silently.

*Oh My Hero,*

*This is my surprise gift for you on your ninth birthday. I hope you like it.*

*With Love,*

*Your Papa*

Joy filled me. My smile stretched the skin around my mouth and I had to touch the bicycle over and over to make sure it was real and not another dream. Guilt filled me. I should not have thought my father had forgotten my birthday; he always made sure I was happy even when he had nothing to give me but his smile. Tears rolled down my cheeks. "Oh Papa," I said aloud, "You know I wanted a bicycle for such a long time." He must know that I think it is freedom to ride my own bike.

Back in the house, I put on my shoes and thought, I could not get a better wish. I went back outside and could not stop looking at my bicycle. I tossed the ribbon aside and sat on the seat. The bike was easy to push to and fro with my toes touching the ground on either side.

Another round of barking pulled my attention to the side and I decided to lock the door and go for a ride. I pushed the pedals to turn the crank and the wheels,

feeling the the mechanics of the bicycle under my body and balancing my weight to move around people who walked along the road. The streets were crowded. Zooming in and out of traffic, I wanted to ride everywhere. I rode all the way to my father's workplace. I knew he was busy and could not see me. If I called to him, he wouldn't be able to hear me over the whirring of the machines he had to use. Still, I wanted him to know how much I was enjoying his gift.

I rode back and forth on the street in front of the factory wondering if he was able to look out from a window during these moments when I was outside and I smiled thinking perhaps he would see just how happy I was.

"Wheel!" A whistle startled me and I realized I was riding too slowly among the crowds in Calcutta. People were busy and they didn't want any interruptions or delays. I was just a young boy playing on my bike in front of them; unwelcome, and no one was shy in telling me so.

I pushed my weight on the pedals again and took off in a flash to ride to an empty field where I often played cricket with my friends.

"Whoa! A new bike!" Dipto was almost as excited as I was, tossing the cricket bat from his hand and running over to the edge of the field. "Rohan, look at this," he squealed.

Other boys protested, "Come on! We're in the middle of a game."

Rohan ran from the tin can we always used to mark

the base and pulled at the handlebars.

“Papa gave it to me for a birthday gift,” I tried to explain humbly but could not stop smiling. It seemed like everyone playing cricket ran over and was asking me about the bike.

Rohan punched me in the arm. He smiled too when he said, “You didn’t say it was your birthday.”

I just shrugged my shoulders. I wanted to keep the appearance that it was unimportant. I worried if I told my friends about it and then my father did not remember, I would be embarrassed. But now that Papa remembered and gave me this wonderful present, I wanted everyone to celebrate with me. I looked around and knew how many of them did not have their own bicycles and felt self-conscious. I knew my happiness was because of my father’s note, not really from the bike. I couldn’t explain those feelings to my friends.

“Happy Birthday!”

“Thanks Dipto,” I said and slapped his shoulder. Rohan and Dipto were my two very best friends. I couldn’t pick better pals to share my birthday.

Dipto told Rohan, “Bring a birthday cake from the shop for Apu.”

Rohan nodded. “Okay. How many people want cake?”

The kids called out words that reminded me of the dogs barking from the morning outside my house. I laughed knowing it was my birthday that created this joy all around me. Still, I didn’t want a big deal in front of everyone. I leaned in to Rohan and said,

“Please don’t bring a cake.”

“Why?” Rohan’s smile was almost as big as mine when he looked me in the eye. “It’s a special day!”

I pulled my friend aside in the fray while the other boys talked about the cake. I confessed, “I have not celebrated my birthday since my mother’s death.” I looked at my shoes, like I do whenever I want to run away. I couldn’t hold back any tears that stirred when I thought of her. “I was surprised my father,” I started to tell him but could not finish when I felt the words choke in my throat.

Rohan’s smile faded. “Oh sorry,” he said and shook my shoulders to remind me that he was close enough to be around when I need someone to talk to. He also pulled my stare to his just as Dipto walked to us. “You okay? You guys are quiet over here.” Dipto stretched his arm around his shoulder and when Rohan explained my sadness surrounded by the joy, he said, “We understand.”

I squeaked out the words, “It’s been three years.”

Rohan frowned and led me away from the cackling boys who were still talking about how they would celebrate the day. Dipto pulled the bicycle from me and rode slowly next to us as we three went away from the cricket field.

When the sadness passed, I turned to Dipto and laughed. “You have your own bicycle; why did you take mine?”

Dipto stopped and motioned toward the bike. “Mine is not as nice as this!”

Rohan pushed Dipto from the seat. “Let him ride

his bike!”

I called out, “Yeah, get yours and we can take a ride.”

I straddled the seat and Dipto hopped on the handlebars and laughed. “You’re going to bend the frame and I just got it!”

“You ride my handlebars all the time!”

“That’s because I didn’t have my own.”

Rohan grabbed Dipto’s hand and pulled him to run down the street toward his house so he could get his bike. “I’ll get mine and give you a ride,” he said.

We rode the whole day. It was dusk before we stopped riding. We wound up near the small bridge Papa didn’t like us sitting on. But it was away from the cars and our bikes would be safe leaned up against the side of the bridge while we climbed up and let our legs swing over the edge. Everyone became quiet. Maybe they were feeling the same freedom that I did as they rode their bikes. I closed my eyes only so that I could open them to make sure it was real and I wasn’t waking from another awful dream. The sky was turning red with sunset and I wondered if my father was home from work. I wanted to go home to eat my mother’s homemade cake. I couldn’t stop the extremes of emotions I felt. The day was either elation or depression. A part of me wanted the day to last forever and I hated seeing sunset wishing it was only the sunrise reminding me of seeing the note in the morning. At the same time, I wanted the sky to turn dark with night so that my birthday would be over and I would stop thinking of my mother’s absence.

I climbed off the bridge without saying a word to my friends and although I could hear them call after me, I did not even turn back to them. I just wanted to be home, hopefully with my father.

I rode slower than I had all day and when I was close to my father's workplace, I saw him coming from the factory doors. Again, my emotions ran amok. I felt happy and sad. Happy to see him and I rode quickly to him so that I could wrap my arms around his waist, but sad that he looked so tired. Papa works so hard and must have spend so much of his money on this bike. How could I ever pay him back for such a gift?

Masking his exhaustion was a huge smile. He called out so everyone around could hear, "My son, how was your birthday?"

"Oh Papa, it was wonderful! The bike is better than anything I could have wished for!" I hoped he understood how grateful I was for the gift.

He ruffed the hair on my head and then said, "Come, let me see how well you ride." He stepped back to watch me circle around where workers were trying to walk. Again, folks bustling to get home were not pleased that I was playing on my bicycle in the streets intruding upon their path.

Papa pointed around the corner. He said, "I must go to the grocery store to pick up some things. You go on home."

I got off my bike and shook my head. "I'll go along with you," I insisted and walked the bike alongside



my father.

The shopkeeper's girth hardly allowed him to move from behind the counter. He leaned his weight while he chewed betel. I could smell the fragrant stimulant in the air and scrunched my nose in disgust looking at the stains in his mustache from the chewing habit.

"Brother," Papa addressed the shopkeeper, "How have you been?"

The shopkeeper nodded without words. He dragged his forefinger and thumb along his mustache while continuing to chew. Papa smiled and gave him his order, "Five kilograms of rice, one liter of oil and half a kilo of pea."

"Lentil?"

"Yes."

The shopkeeper went to work gathering the items. When everything was in small paper bags atop the counter, he asked, "Anything else?"

I noticed Papa look at small square cakes on the counter made with raisins and honey. I saw his eyes move to me and wondered if he was thinking of asking me if I would like one. Maybe it reminded him of the cakes Mama would make.

He turned away from the cake and said, "What is the market price of onions?"

"Fifty rupees per kilo. How much do you want? One kilo? More?"

My father sighed heavily. His eyes looked back to the cake while he said, "No, give me a half." He shifted his weight on his feet and looked around the store. "The price of everything increases day by day.

I can't afford to buy more than a half,"

The shop keeper interrupted Papa by explaining, "I'm not making a huge profit here. I give fair prices."

Papa waved away his comment. "I know you give a fair price." I saw Papa look at me and his smiled seemed nervous, like he was embarrassed about quarreling over the cost of food.

The shopkeeper leaned his weight on the counter. He seemed annoyed that Papa was still looking around.

"Potatoes," Papa finally said. "I need a kilogram of potatoes."

The shopkeeper measured the weight into another paper bag when Papa leaned to me and whispered, "Do you want one of these cakes?"

I looked at them and again thought about the one my mother used to make. I saw the strain in Papa's fingers as he pointed to the small morsel and thought about how hard he worked for his money.

I shook my head and said, "No thank you."

Papa frowned and I'm not sure why. He asked the shopkeeper how much to pay and the shopkeeper moved his fingers in the air while he calculated in his mind the amount Papa owed. "Three hundred eighty rupees."

That sounded like a lot to me. I wonder how much Papa gets paid.

Papa said, "I will pay you three notes of hundred rupees today." His face looked strong when he pointed behind the shopkeeper and said, "Write the

rest in the ledger.” I saw his face soften when the shopkeeper raised his eyebrow at Papa and he said, “Please.”

The shopkeeper looked at me and smiled at Papa. He pulled a book from under the counter. He pulled a pen from behind his ear and thumbed through the pages to get to Papa’s name. There was a listing of all the times Papa was permitted to take groceries and pay later. There were numbers and calculations all over the page. The shopkeeper reminded Papa, “You have twelve hundred rupees due. This makes twelve eighty.”

Papa nodded. He confirmed, “I will pay you next month after getting my salary.”

The shopkeeper nodded and then closed the book before taking money from Papa’s hand. Papa took the bag and held the door of the shop open for me. I jumped on my bicycle and called out, “I bet I can get home before you!”

Papa laughed and pretended to run, but I knew he only took a few steps before he slowed and walked the rest of the way.

I parked my bicycle exactly where I found it in the morning, ran into the house to get the lock and the small card he left me tied to the handlebars. I pulled a red pen from my school work and wrote the words ‘Thank you Papa and tied the note around the bike again. I hoped he would see it when he was coming into the house.

I poured some water into two glasses, one for me and one for my father. He would be thirsty after

walking home. I sat at the small table in my room still thinking about discovering the bike outside in the morning. Creak, the chair sounded like it was going to break under me from the fall in the morning. I knew I had to study for my classes but I kept wondering how long my father would be and if he would see my note. I wanted to tell him how wonderful it was to ride with my friends all day and watch the sunset at the bridge. I wanted my father to work less and share these times with me, but then I started wondering about my father's childhood and the laughter I shared with my friends. Did he have a bicycle when he was a young boy?

I heard the door open and I beamed with joy.

Papa stood in my doorway. He said, "You can study later. Come tell me about your day while I cook for us."

I slammed my school book closed and rushed to get to the kitchen with Papa, sitting at the small table and talking as quickly as I seemed to ride on my bike. "I have a bicycle now, just like all my friends," I told him, but I knew liking the bicycle was only part of the joy I felt. I wanted to tell my father I was happy my birthday was remembered. Perhaps it meant his grief was passing. And then the sadness of forgetting my mother took over. I started to cry and Papa let the rice cook on the stove to come over and hold my hand. I think he felt the same mix up of happy and sad I did.

When the rice and lentil was ready, I was not hungry. Papa told me I had to eat, but remembering Mama

was filling my belly with knots and I didn't want to put food in it.

"I'm remembering Mom," I sobbed.

He nodded and pushed the plates of food away for a moment. "Oh," was the only word he could say, but a heavy sigh told me that he often thought about her and was filled with the same weird feeling in the pit of his stomach.

I asked, "Why did Mama leave us?"

"Your mother has not gone anywhere. She is always with us. We just can't see her now."

I didn't understand. "Did she see me with my bike? Did she listen when I wished," I stopped talking. I wanted to know that my mother heard my birthday wish.

My father stood and pushed the plate of food toward me again. "Eat your dinner."

I didn't want it.

"You must eat," he said.

I knew my father would not let me go to bed hungry. I pushed the food around the plate and hoped it was enough movement to satisfy my father.

He saw that I was not going to eat and said, "Okay, that is enough. You can go to bed if you want." He shook his head and I knew he thought I was too skinny.

When the kitchen was clean, he came to my room and I pretended to sleep. I felt him tuck the blankets around my body and kiss my forehead. Then he curled up on the floor of my room and muttered, "Sheema, life of poor people is full of hardship. I

was never able to fulfill your desires.” I heard him crying and wondered why he was talking to my mother in my bedroom. “I couldn’t even celebrate the birthday of our baby boy. You always made sure he had a homemade cake and it felt like we faced no problems when you were here with us. Even in poverty, you seemed to manage.” I could hear him crying more than talking and then sighed heavily.

I turned my body without opening my eyes so he was reminded he was in my room and not alone. I would have given anything to be with Mama again, but I felt like I was intruding on Papa’s private moment.

I could hear Papa shuffle his body and whisper, “I want your spirit to make our son know how special he is. I want him to be happy.”

The room was quiet. There of course was no response, but Papa stood unmoving and seemed to wait for one.

**RELEASING ON 12 NOV, 2015.**

If you liked reading this free excerpt you can *pre-order now* kindle eBook or paperback edition of this book from the following Amazon US store pages:

1. Paperback: List price - US \$9.99  
<http://www.amazon.com/dp/1511629614>
2. Kindle: : List price - US \$2.99  
<http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B011G10VLY>

**FOLLOW THE AUTHOR:**

Twitter [@santonudhar](https://twitter.com/santonudhar)

**JOIN IN THE FACEBOOK:**

<http://facebook.com/Prochesta.Effort>

<http://facebook.com/santonudhar>

**ALSO FROM THE AUTHOR :**

**LIFE OF LOVE**

<http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0615718256>